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ABSTRACT

One of the continuing concerns of those involved in institutional planning is that results somehow be linked to decision making processes. An important way to link these activities is through the timely provision of relevant information. The purpose of this paper is to identify several types of information that have been generated as part of academic planning activities at the University of Michigan and that have been found useful in facilitating a planning perspective in decision making. Two types of information that facilitate such a perspective are: (1) an indication of unit aspirations and (2) a delineation of present conditions relative to these aspirations. The contributions of such information are discussed along with several techniques (e.g., institutional profiles and peer comparisons) for interpreting the information once it has been collected. (Author)

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LINKING ACADEMIC PLANNING TO DECISION MAKING

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ABSTRACT

LINKING ACADEMIC PLANNING TO DECISION MAKING

by

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One of the continuing concerns of those involved in institutional planning is that results somehow be linked to decision making processes. An important way to link these activities is through the timely provision of relevant information. The purpose of this paper is to identify several types of information that have been generated as part of academic planning activities at the University of Michigan and that have been found useful in facilitating a planning perspective in decision making.

Two types of information that facilitate such a perspective are (1) an indication of unit aspirations and (2) a delineation of present conditions relative to these aspirations. The contributions of such information are discussed along with several techniques (e.g., institutional profiles and peer comparisons) for interpreting the information once it has been collected.

Over the past few years increasing attention has been given to planning in higher education, and it is no small coincidence that this development has occurred at the same time that financial support has been eroding. Bruce Fuller (1976) has suggested that the value placed on planning varies inversely with the availability of resources. Planning has occurred in the past but never with the same urgency that prevails today. This reflects an acknowledgement that the future environment of higher education portends fiscal limitations which make present decisions on resource use critically important. An institution unmindful of tenure ratios may lose future staffing flexibility; inattention to current equipment needs and maintenance requirements may defy easy rectification in the years ahead. It is imperative, therefore, that decisions be made only after information has been studied that enables informed judgments to be made about the impact of a decision, both in relation to immediate and long range objectives.

One of the important considerations in any planning effort is the information that will be generated to support decision making. Lawrence (1977) has suggested that decision making processes rely upon information from the following three systems: (1) the operational system; (2) the management system; and (3) the planning system. The operational system is comprised of data which characterizes the nature of activity in a unit and how resources are being used (for example, number of graduates and support staff salaries). The management system analyzes and synthesizes data produced within the operating system and produces information to be used in determining whether plans and priorities are being realized. The planning system generates information concerning goals and objectives, priorities, policies, and environmental conditions.

Linking these three information systems to decision making processes is very important if resources are to be used wisely. There are many problems and concerns in establishing and maintaining these linkages including such things as: (1) the tendency toward centralization of authority whenever information is centrally collected and analyzed; (2) the inclination to attach greater importance to quantitative measures as opposed to qualitative ones; (3) the pressures to over-emphasize computer approaches to problem solving; (4) the errors of judgment caused by lack of data comparability; (5) the need to maintain sufficient flexibility to respond to new information needs; and (6) the judgment required to balance the information needs of users with concerns over confidentiality (Adams, 1977).

In addition to the above, two special problems in relating information systems to decision making processes involve the perspective of decision makers and the issue of timeliness. When confronted with a problem, decision makers tend to assess alternative solutions in light of current needs and resources. The longer range perspective is difficult to ensure, particularly as one moves from estimating possible impacts to assessing the extent to which alternatives will lead to the achievement of desired objectives. There is a need to cultivate a planning perspective among decision makers. This perspective is fostered to the extent that planning systems yield information that is useful and timely.

Unless planning activities produce information of use in decision making processes, planning will become an isolated activity, and participants will lose interest very quickly. Many early master planning efforts undertaken by statewide higher education agencies failed to make the decision making connection, resulting in finished plans having little or no impact.

Useful information is certainly important but equally critical is its timing if a planning perspective is to be incorporated into decision making. There is little to be gained from developing a comprehensive information system if its component parts are not produced on a cycle that coincides with decision making processes. Sandlin (1977) has suggested that information systems must be in rhythm with the schedule of decision making. Within an institution some decisions are made on a regular or cyclical basis while others are ad hoc in nature. Ad hoc decisions will remain a challenge to those responsible for information systems. The cyclical decisions provide a greater degree of control and an ability to anticipate information needs. Those responsible for encouraging a planning perspective in decision making must remain attentive to decision making schedules.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the types of information found to be useful in fostering a planning perspective among those making academic program decisions at the University of Michigan. As part of this discussion attention also will be given to the information needs being addressed and to some tentative conclusions about information linkages. This discussion draws heavily on recent experiences in implementing an academic planning process at the University but also relies upon the results of similar activities at other institutions.

Information Requirements

For the past four years the University's Office of Academic Affairs has been engaged in a number of activities designed to stimulate interest in planning as a preparatory step to decision making, both at the institutional and unit levels. Several types of information were identified as needed to

help accomplish this objective. The two types to be discussed include: (1) a delineation of unit aspirations and (2) an assessment of present condition relative to these aspirations. A third type of information which has become increasingly important but will not be discussed here is concerned with estimating the likely resource constraints under which an institution will operate in the future. Such information is critical to any programmatic decisions requiring long range or continuing resource support. However, such financial forecasting is still in its infancy and several alternative strategies are currently being evaluated.

Unit Aspirations

One of the early and very time-consuming tasks undertaken involved the development of a statement of objectives and trends for all schools and colleges and academically related units of the University. With the assistance of a faculty committee, a series of questions were prepared to guide this effort. The questions solicited three to five year objectives for major program emphases (instruction, research and service) and for a number of current priority concerns, e.g. affirmative action. In addition trend information was also requested for any items that were likely to affect a unit's ability to make progress in achieving its objectives. In specifying objectives units were encouraged to include operational as well as conceptual statements. The conceptual objectives satisfied information needs regarding each unit's basic orientation; the operational objectives portrayed an implementation strategy that could be monitored. An explicit assumption used to guide this effort was that General Fund support was not expected to increase in real dollar terms.

The payoffs for undertaking this difficult task have been varied and sometimes surprising. In some respects the process of establishing objectives was as important as the end results. Preparing a set of com-

prehensive objectives required some units to resolve long standing conflicts or to encourage a school-wide perspective. In a few instances the process also provided an opportunity to introduce new programming ideas or suggestions for realigning present activities without arousing concerns as to motive. After all one reason for undertaking this planning activity was to stimulate creative thinking about ways to cope with the likelihood of stable or declining resources. One school, one that had been slowly developing a doctoral program while trying to maintain a strong undergraduate curriculum, came to the realization that current and anticipated resources would not support a strong emphasis in both areas. In developing its programmatic objectives for the next five years, the faculty of the school decided to give primary attention to increasing the size and improving the quality of its graduate program, given that other nearby institutions could adequately meet the undergraduate demand.

For the Office of Academic Affairs one payoff was in securing information from all academic units (schools, colleges, centers, institutes, libraries, and support units) on academic program matters but also for important related items such as affirmative action, physical facilities, enrollment, and instructional support services. The expectation for this information was that it would permit a rather detailed picture of individual unit aspirations and, at the same time, would provide a general indication of commitment to specific institutional concerns and priorities. The process also helped identify some common problems that required the attention of central administrative officers, for example, promotion procedures for faculty with joint appointments and inadequate coordination between central and unit support services such as admissions, counseling, and financial aid.

In general the process of developing a statement of objectives was supported and was evaluated as beneficial. However, the lingering concern among most participants was that the process would now flounder and that their efforts would have no impact on future resource decisions. Consequently, as part of resource allocation processes, an attempt has been made to include assessments of current conditions relative to stated objectives.

Current Condition

A second category of information developed to encourage a planning perspective in decision making related to assessing the present condition of each unit with respect to its objectives and in relation to special problems facing each unit and the institution. Such assessments require that early consideration be given to the level of analysis required. For larger institutions it is not feasible for information to be regularly collected, analyzed, and reported for every institutional and unit objective. We have found that maintaining a minimum set of information relating to priority concerns of the schools and colleges and the institution requires substantial effort, perseverence, and discrimination. Three questions have been found useful in deciding what information to collect: (1) what information is needed to monitor unit and institutional progress on important objectives and agreements; (2) what information has been regularly employed in recent decisions; and (3) what information is needed to facilitate decisions on critical matters likely to arise in the future. If judiciously applied these three questions can narrow the field of potential information quite substantially.

The third question may arouse some concern because the approach suggested is one of specifying data to be collected before a need has been expressed. Some restraint is necessary since it is quite feasible for

massive information systems to be developed which have little relevancy to actual problems and concerns of the future. On the other hand, if one waits until the need arises to begin collection procedures, it is quite possible that meaningful information will arrive too late to be of use. Balancing these two concerns requires that new information needs be carefully assessed, perhaps in combination with a review of the use of current information. For every decision process the key is to identify the principle information items and make them available; other interesting items which make only marginal contributions should be eliminated. It makes good sense to consider the relative value of information currently collected whenever new items are introduced.

The specific information items identified to answer the above questions will vary according to institution. Undoubtedly some traditional items will be selected by all institutions, for example, admission to application rates and student credit hours per FTE faculty. However, some items will be unique because of the nature of the institution. Two good examples are the indicators of sponsored research activity that are monitored by most universities and the level of constituency support (in students and dollars) that is important to many sectarian institutions. In addition increasing attention is being given to information that addresses qualitative concerns. Such things as the quality of entering students, of the undergraduate curriculum, and of support services are examples of such interest. The usual approach has been to try to develop quantitative indicators of quality. These efforts are important and should be continued. However, it should be remembered in these endeavors, as well as in all other assessments, that most decisions are too complex to be reduced to several items of information and that the purpose of such information is not to make decisions but to enhance decision making by providing insight.

After identifying and collecting the information needed to answer the above questions, the problem becomes one of interpretation, that is, how to give meaning to the information. The following three strategies are suggested: (1) an historical perspective; (2) an institutional profile; and (3) peer comparisons.

The historical perspective consists of longitudinal data for each item of information that help in tracking changes over time. This information can be assessed in relation to past and current objectives and to shifts in priorities. There are a few problems with this approach in that historical information is subject to manipulation, depending upon the choice of comparison years. Some will want to focus attention on the difference between the present year and what is believed to be the ideal level achieved at some earlier time. In reality the adequacy of a particular base year is difficult to prove; the insight to be gained relates to changes and trends over time. Another limitation with this information is that the position of a unit relative to other units in the institution and to peers in other institutions is ignored.

Comparisons within an institution can occur through an institutional profile. The profile displays important items of information for all units in the institution. These displays have been found particularly useful in assessing the equity of support for each unit within the institution as well as in identifying how resources have been utilized. There will certainly be differences among the units, often ones that are easily explained. For example, it should not be too surprising to find that average class sizes in artistic disciplines are significantly lower than for the social sciences. Such deviations for more similar units might be suspect. In general this information indicates resource availability and use by units within an institution but requires substantial interpretation and judgment

because there are some very real differences among units for such things as outside funding potential, teaching strategies, and equipment requirements.

This leads to the need for peer comparisons. To be sure there are problems associated with such collection processes but useful insights into competitive position can be gained from such information, particularly if peers are selected by the units as being quite similar in purpose, programs, and quality. If this is done the differences among the peers on specific items cannot be explained solely on the basis of such things as unique programmatic thrusts or clienteles.

It should be added that the peer results should not be interpreted too precisely, given the inevitable errors in aggregation. In studies of this type more support for findings will be generated if a unit's relative position is defined for the variables examined (for example, are teaching loads higher, lower, or about the same as the peer group) rather than attaching great importance to actual differences in dollars, students, or credit hours.

One other suggestion about peer data collection efforts is that related decisions should utilize information from the same peer clusters. Otherwise a unit or institution can draw erroneous conclusions about its position relative to peers. For example, it does not make good sense to use one set of peers for tuition comparisons and a different peer group in comparing salary levels.

Three strategies have been proposed for interpreting information collected to help assess the extent to which unit or institutional objectives and priorities are being met. The historical perspective portrays trends and changes over time for a particular unit while the institutional profile

and peer comparisons indicate relative standing of a unit among different constituent groups. The three strategies provide different insights and would seem to be most useful when used in tandem.

Summary

The growing interest in planning in higher education has been paralleled by an increase in skepticism about the usefulness of results. Too often substantial resources have been devoted to planning efforts that have had no impact on decision making. Part of the problem is that planning has, until recently, been viewed as a distinct operation to be carried out by a separately designated staff. In this paper, it has been suggested that successful planning occurs only when it has become an integral part of the perspective of all campus decision makers. This perspective is facilitated by the timely provision of information that focuses attention on and gives meaning to such things as institutional and unit aspirations and present condition in relation to those aspirations.

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EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS USED TO SOLICIT OBJECTIVES AND TRENDS

1. WHAT ARE THE INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES OF YOUR UNIT DURING THE NEXT FIVE YEARS? WILL CURRICULAR CHANGES BE NEEDED TO MEET THESE OBJECTIVES?

2. DO THE INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES OF OTHER UNITS EITHER CONTRIBUTE TO OR DETRACT FROM THE PURSUIT OF YOUR INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES?

3. ARE THERE ALTERNATIVE ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS YOU WOULD PROPOSE FOR YOUR UNIT WHICH COULD ENABLE YOU TO PURSUE YOUR OBJECTIVES MORE EFFECTIVELY?

4. DO YOU EXPECT CHANGES IN THE SIZE, QUALIFICATIONS, AND COMPOSITION OF YOUR STUDENT BODY? IF SO, PLEASE DISCUSS THE CHANGES, THEIR CAUSES, AND THEIR IMPACT ON YOUR INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES?

TABLE 2: ADMISSIONS

School

New Graduates

Fall Term	Applications	Admissions	Enrollment	Adm./App.	Enr./Adm.
1974	310			83	90
1975	421			53	86
1976	470			57	90
1977	481			56	91

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Transparency #3: Example of Institutional Profile Format

STATISTICAL PROFILE

1976-77

School or College		Workload Data		
		SCH Taught	FYES Taught	FYES/GF FTE
A		13,575	498	13.9
B		11,455	380	10.8
C		48,071	1797	21.8
D		33,509	749	4.3
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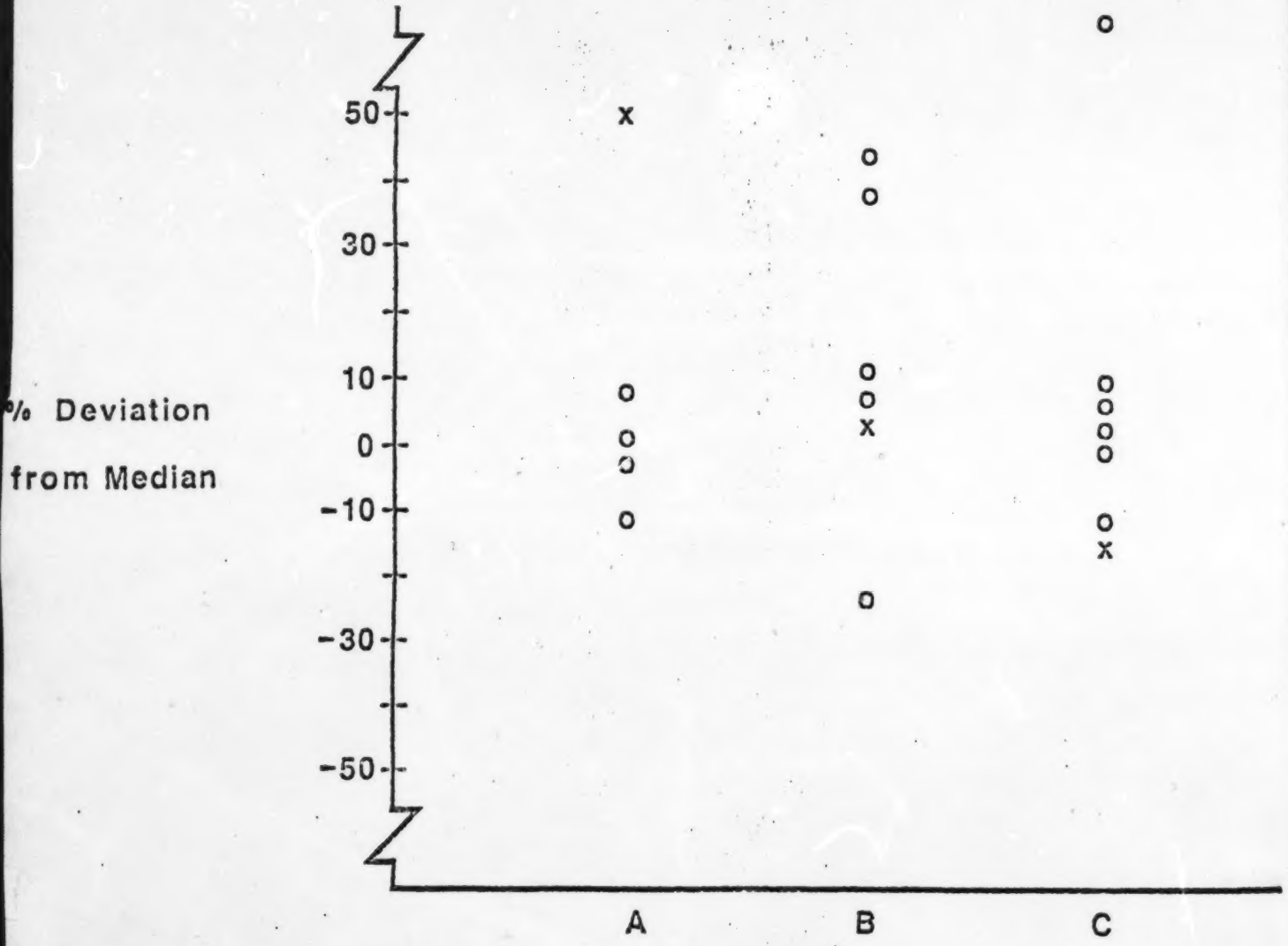
Transparency #4: A Strategy for Interpreting Peer Information

GENERAL FUND EXPENDITURES PER FTE STUDENT



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